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SUBJECT: SENEGAL: OPPOSITION LAUNCHES NATIONAL DIALOGUE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite tremendous government pressure and intimidation against it, Senegal's main opposition has successfully kicked off a three- to six-month long National Dialogue (Assises National) to diagnose and propose solutions to the country's political, economic and social problems. Although President Abdoulaye Wade accused its organizers of plotting to overthrow the government, the very well attended opening ceremony brought together civil society groups, NGOs, political parties of all stripes, religious leaders, and representatives of various players of the local economy. Representatives of Western embassies, including the United States, attended the opening ceremony in spite of being urged (and in some cases threatened) not to go by the foreign minister. However, the government successfully coerced every African, Asian, and Arab representative to boycott the event. END SUMMARY.

Threats

¶2. (SBU) President Abdoulaye Wade called the National Dialogue a "plot to overthrow his government by politicians disguised as civil society leaders." Farba Senghor, Minister of Air Transportation and spokesperson of the ruling PDS (Democratic Party of Senegal) warned leaders of NGOs, private sector companies, and even religious brotherhoods that President Wade would be counting his friends and those who participated in the National Dialogue will have deliberately chosen to be against him and "should not come back asking for mercy if sanctioned." The Minister of Interior separately pressured an independent TV station, 2S TV, not to air a program on the National Dialogue featuring Ms. Penda Mbow and Mr. Mohamed MBodj, two members of civil society who are the intellectual architects of the National Dialogue. On May 30, the Prime Minister Cheikh Hadjibou Soumare gathered his cabinet around midnight to deliver a message to the nation to invite people to boycott the National Dialogue.

More Threats

¶3. (SBU) President Wade also instructed Foreign Minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio to call all the main foreign representations in Senegal to urge them not to go. In discussions with our colleagues, we were informed by the Swedish charge d'affaires that she was threatened by Foreign Minister Gadio who told her that "she would bear the consequences if anything went wrong." The ambassador of Switzerland, according to their deputy chief of mission, was similarly threatened. Most Western countries chose to ignore the government's pressure and intimidation. Along with the United States, France, Germany, the EU, Canada, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands and Romania, attended the opening ceremony. Note. Charge d'Affaires was received by the FM Gadio in a private meeting in which Gadio cited the seditious nature of the Assises as a reason the U.S. "would not want to be there." We were not overtly threatened with retaliation. End note. In stark contrast there was not one representative from Asian, Arab or African countries. According to former Environment Minister and National Assembly Deputy Abdoulaye Bathily, several African embassies, including those of Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, had indicated they were

planning to attend the opening ceremonies but felt obliged to not do so after having been importuned by government officials.

Manipulation

¶4. (SBU) In a discussion with former Army Chief of Staff, General Keita, who is the Secretary-General of the Assises, he revealed that President Wade personally called him the night before the Assises at his office to ask him not to go. The spokesperson of the National Dialogue Ms. Rahmet Sow, a leading figure in the small opposition party Jeuf Jeul, told Embassy, "The [Mourides] Caliph in Touba [the country's leading religious figure] had promised that he would send someone of import, but that the government handed out so much money over the last few days that they were persuaded not to go."

Yet Intimidation Backfires

¶5. (SBU) Clearly, President Wade's strategy to scare people off backfired. The meeting was extremely well attended by a wide and eclectic array of actors. All the major religious families, including five from the Mourides branch who chose to defy the Caliph, were in attendance as well as a representative from Cardinal Sarr, Archbishop of Senegal. Senegal's better known NGOs such as Forum Civil and Mouvement Citoyen as well as leading labor chiefs took an active role in preparing the Dialogue. President Wade and his entourage, by choosing to boycott the Dialogue, treating the organizers of the Assises with contempt and using authoritarian methods to sabotage the project seems to have made a strategic mistake and a tactical blunder. Prominent Senegalese figures felt insulted by these tactics and showed their support of Senegal's

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democracy by ignoring the government's ham-handed attempts to intimidate them.

¶6. (SBU) The chair of the Natinoal Dialogue, Professor Amadou Makhtar Mbow, a former director general of UNESCO, reiterated his appeal to President Wade to join the gathering. Mbow, who is well-respected by his countrymen, responded to Wade's accusations that they were plotting his overthrow by noting that "the Assises do not exclude anyone and are not against anybody." He said that he recognized the legitimacy of Wade's government, but that this legitimacy did not preclude the Senegalese from "freely exercising their right to ponder their own future." Mbow gave a stark analysis of the country's situation noting that many Senegalese would starve without remittances from immigrants. He further commented that after forty years of independence, fifty percent of the population still live below the poverty line and forty percent of the poorest households share only 17 percent of the country's income.

A Two-Pronged Strategy

¶7. (SBU) In the coming month, local teams will spread throughout the country's thirty-five districts to hold discussions with local populations to hear their ideas on a wide array of topics from public policies, democracy, good governance, environmental degradation, to the agronomic situation. Syntheses of these discussions, after validation at the local level, will be aggregated at the national level. Concomitantly, thematic committees will hold interviews with intellectuals and key actors at the national level to seek their views and recommendations for the future of the country. The whole process of the National Dialogue is supposed to last between three and six months and will end with a national plenary that will validate all the conclusions and recommendations.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) The National Dialogue is the vehicle that Senegal's weak opposition wants to ride out of isolation after their disastrous decision to boycott the June 2007 legislative elections virtually excluded them from any of Senegal's national political institutions. Seeing its initial success, it will be difficult for Preside Wade

to continue to ignore a movement of political opponents and civil society leaders who seek to peacefully promote the strengthening of democracy and good governance in Senegal. The opening of the Dialogue, despite the threats of the GOS, was attended by a quality audience of heavyweights who will be difficult to disregard. It now seems that the ability to bribe or threaten opinion leaders and the support of the Caliph of the Mourides may no longer be adequate means to relegate dissent to the sidelines. As former Minister Bathily told us, the opening of the Dialogue showed that many opinion leaders think the time has come to put Senegalese democracy back on track, improve governance, and to weed out the corruption that has become endemic under President Wade.